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ABSTRACT

To help adults develop an awareness of midlife issues, to encourage personal acceptance of the transition, and to introduce appropriate coping skills, a speech communication course was designed that relied on river trip activities to develop insights about this passage. The vehicle for the seminar was a four-day raft trip down the Green River, sponsored by the Colorado Outward Bound School. Several months before the course, participants were informed about midlife transitions (changes in biological conditioning, the sequence of generations, and evolving careers) and given an annotated bibliography on midlife. During the course, group discussion drew attention to the analogies between the river passage and midlife transition: (1) the current of the river is like adult development which can be anticipated but never completely controlled, (2) submerged rocks below the surface of the river are like stressful periods in the transition that often present themselves first as smooth nonevents, and (3) the circular currents of water reflect the sense of limitless time when no progress appears possible. Specific attention was also given to the communication skills of listening, confrontation, and teamwork. One difficulty of the course, however, was that the timing and spacing of the seminar units were entirely dependent on the ability of the staff to predict and produce river activities that were meaningfully integrated with the seminar. Nevertheless, unsolicited letters from participants confirmed the value of the course. (HOD)

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PASSAGES: RAFTING THE GREEN RIVER AS AN ANALOGY TO THE MID-LIFE TRANSITION

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PASSAGES: RAFTING THE GREEN RIVER AS AN ANALOGY TO MID-LIFE

An upsurge of interest in adult development is widely evidenced in both popular and scholarly publications.[1] Investigation of the mid-life transition, once a relatively taboo topic, accounts for a number of these publications.[2] Some communication departments are offering credit courses related to this topic, with titles such as "Communicative Passages," presented by one large midwestern university. Certain communication faculty members are presenting noncredit courses in adult development, such as "Mid-Life Challenge" and "Turning Points: Dealing With Change." Other faculty design and conduct training courses for organizations which include material on personal and/or professional development in different life periods.

This paper describes the endeavor of one speech communication specialist to design and conduct a course on mid-life which relied on river trip activities to develop insights about this passage. The recency of efforts in this area suggests that many different concepts and instructional procedures might be explored. The goals of this particular seminar were to develop awareness of mid-life issues, to encourage personal acceptance of the transition, and to introduce appropriate coping skills. The vehicle for this experiential seminar was a four day raft trip down the Green River, sponsored by the Colorado Outward Bound School.

The Outward Bound School: Its Programs & Pedagogy

The suitability of the river experience for mid-life issues is reinforced by the traditions of the Outward Bound program. Since its founding during World War II, Outward Bound has stressed the development of inner resources through physical as well as mental challenges. Through courses offered by 34 different schools in 17

countries, participants may be found backpacking, canoeing, cross-country skiing, cycling, sailing, and rafting.[3] Trained instructors teach skills, reinforce safety, and encourage participants to verbalize what they learn about themselves and others as a result of these experiences. While many courses are open to a variety of participants, a growing number are aimed at adults in particular work settings: the teachers' practicum, the executive seminar, courses for managers in large organizations. Course objectives also vary; some stress leadership, some teamwork, and others emphasize personal renewal. The mid-life seminar is one of the few single issue courses.

Outward Bound uses the wilderness as a learning laboratory. Participants learn new skills in an unfamiliar setting with a group of strangers who must mobilize into a team in order to accomplish their tasks. These adults discover their own capacities and limitations when they are faced with physical tasks which require cooperative decision making. The immediacy and reality of feedback in this situation provides an educational momentum which many have found memorable.

Educational methodology of Outward Bound has been traditionally nondirective. Allowing the crew to drive their boat up on a rock, the instructor asks, "How might we avoid such an obstacle next time?" Coaching, not directing, is central to the school's educational approach. The raft instructor explains the important considerations in plotting a course for the first rapid. Later on, s/he overlooks the rapid with the crew, asks for their plans, endorses or makes necessary corrections. By the end of the trip, the crew must make its own plan without assistance.

Readings, small group discussions and journals are traditional methods of instruction in Outward Bound programs. Readings tend to be done by instructors just before launch, directing attention to the upcoming experiences and their

emotional impact. Each day's activities are typically debriefed after the boats are unloaded for the evening. Journals are distributed to each participant and some time set aside for writing up reflections on the experiences. These activities are compatible with methods employed by speech communication educators.

"Mid-Life Journey" travels in eight-person rubber rafts from the gates of Lodore in southern Wyoming to Split Mountain in northeastern Utah. It takes four days to navigate these forty-six miles of the Green River as it passes through Dinosaur National Monument; there are a half-dozen minor rapids and several which are rather highly rated on the Grand Canyon scale. The mid-summer excursion typically experiences hot, dry days and cool nights. Rafting is supplemented by optional hikes to waterfalls, overlooks thousands of feet above the river, and Anasazi petroglyphs. These four days include enough novelty and stress to stimulate most adults, yet not so much that they are too tired or overwhelmed to carry on meaningful discussions.

Overview of the Mid-Life Transition and Its Relation to Rafting

While there are various formulations of the mid-life transition, this course was most directly influenced by the conceptualizations of middle adulthood (ages 40-60) attributed to Daniel J. Levinson.[4] While Levinson's writing primarily reflects his research with adult males, many of his interpretations appear to have validity for women in mid-life transition: changes in biological conditioning, the sequence of generations, and evolving careers. The raft trip provides opportunities for each of these three components to emerge.

Changes in biological conditions refer to decreases in strength, quickness and endurance, along with the opportunity to escape from the tyranny of some physical drives. Successful transition depends on accepting somewhat lower physical standards while celebrating the development of other qualities which may offset

the lessening of real or imagined physical prowess. The river passage is commensurate with changes in physical conditions at mid-life, in that it requires a combination of some physical strength with judgment. The strongest paddler is not necessarily the most successful one; executing the rapids puts a premium on balance between physical and mental prowess.

By the phrase "sequence of generations," Levinson is emphasizing that adults in this life span have a sense of moving from one generation to another and of forming new relationships with other generations. A task specific to mid-life is to become more aware of both the child and the elder within oneself. Recovery of the child is implicit in a number of raft trip activities: learning many new knots and boating techniques, the excitement of navigating the rapids, the fun of a mud wallow.

The relationships between mid-life participants and youthful instructors is a relevant lesson in establishing ties to a different generation. Many of those on the trips have little prior contact with young adults (aged 25-30) and those they do put them in a leadership position vis-a-vis their grown children or junior employees. On the river, young adult instructors not only reverse this leadership position, they are the only ones with the expertise to guarantee personal safety. These role reversals seem particularly apt in building new ties to other generations.

"Evolving careers" is Levinson's emphasis on the common experience of peaking out in one's major endeavor and choosing to redirect at least some of one's energy toward life goals previously unfilled. Some evidence of redirected energy is expressed on raft trips through reversed gender roles with regard to leadership. The women who captain apparently enjoy a sense of task leadership which has not characterized their work histories. Some men express a sense of initial frustration at taking commands from a female captain, especially if she lacks boating experience. However, there are also men who are able to verbalize some of the

benefits of being part of the crew. While they may take an occasional turn at being captain, they seem relieved at not being held responsible for every outcome, they have fun being cheerleaders for less experienced leaders, and they take a certain pleasure in relaxing while someone else takes the risks. Shifting away from one's former patterns of responsibility and experimenting with others is a mid-life task which is especially congruent with rafting activities.

Instructional Development

Plans for this seminar were developed during close consultation with Outward Bound staff members familiar with this particular section of the river. Participants were informed several months before the course about the course, generally, and the mid-life discussions specifically. This mailing also included an annotated bibliography on mid-life.[5] The author met with the raft instructors one day before the course to discuss the seminar design and coordinate final arrangements. With so many new skills to master and sights to see, trip time devoted exclusively to the seminar is limited and coordination with the staff is critical.

Group discussion aimed at drawing out analogies between the river passage and the mid-life transition are conducted in the total group (4 boats: 28 people) at the beginning and the end of the trip, but are most frequently held within the boat groups (6 participants plus the instructor). One of the analogies which develops frequently in these discussions is the current of the river which is like adult development in that it can be anticipated but never completely controlled. Neither would exist, except that they are fed by many sources; in this sense, their identity is both individual and the result of contact with others. This feature recalls Codey's "looking glass self" and Levinson's discussion of multiple selves.[6]

The river shares with adult development the alternation between smooth and rough passages, along with the constant possibility of unforeseen dangers. Experi-

enced rafters guide their rafts by establishing the "correct attitude" toward the current. Rafts proceed most expeditiously, not by fighting for mastery, but by discovering natural direction and then adjusting their positions relative to it. The "correct attitude" procedure fits Levinson's concept of adjustment to biological and psychological changes.

The river passage has certain characteristics which appear to parallel experiences mid-life participants share. Protruding rocks are seldom a cause for disaster. It is the "sleepers," submerged rocks just below the surface, which account for most of the damage to rafts and crew. Ironically, these "sleepers" may be identified because the water flowing over them is especially smooth, changing to frothy waves downstream of the submerged rock. Participants remarked that stressful periods in this transition often present themselves first as smooth nonevents; an engineer who had worked on missile guidance systems for years suddenly resigned his well paying job because he could no longer reconcile it with personal values shifting toward pacifism. This decision came to him, not at a nuclear demonstration, but when stuck in a traffic jam on the way to his office. There are a number of analogies which, like this one, point toward the similarity between "sleepers" and issues Levinson reports as characteristic of the mid-life transition.

Psychological changes in mid-life also find analogies in the river passage. Behind the rocks and sleepers are eddies, circular currents of water which capture rock-hitting rafts and propel them in circles. Participants experiencing separation and/or divorce remarked on the parallel with their lives: a sense of limitless time when no progress appears to be possible and no amount of effort seems capable of managing escape from the disaster area.

There are a number of other analogies between the river passage and the mid-life transition which emerged in large and small group discussions. Some have

the ring of consensus, others appear to have highly personalized meanings. Discussion based on analogies proves helpful in meeting the objectives of awareness and acceptance for mid-life participants.

Structured experiences were introduced into the instructional plan, primarily to foster the development of coping skills appropriate to the mid-life transition. While many different communication skills might have been considered, three were specified for this seminar because of their compatibility with Outward Bound's activities and communication goals. These were: listening, confrontation and teamwork.

Listening becomes an essential skill since maturity and adaptation are achieved through symbolic interaction as Dance and Larson have suggested.[7] Listening practice begins in the first session, when participants pair and exchange information about the costs and benefits of the upcoming trip, as well as some personal history. When directed to summarize what the other has said, most people find that their listening skills need attention. Later in the course, participants have an exercise in paraphrasing the arguments of another. This lesson uses a debate format: the pros and cons of mid-life. In this experience, many discover that what goes by the term "listening" is usually silent rehearsal of one's next pronouncement. Another exercise performed in the boat groups (Two Truths & One Lie) tests the extent to which participants have knowledge of one another, based on discourse within the crew.

Confrontation with self and others is a useful skill for those engaged in role change, with mid-life no exception. Willingness to confront one's own possibilities and limitations is essential in the search for redirection. The debate on the pros and cons of mid-life allows many of the taboo topics, such as physical decline and mortality, to be expressed and acknowledged. However, those in transition must

not only elect meaningful change, they must deal with the reactions of others who may feel threatened or disadvantaged.

The Sinbad simulation, typically used in values clarification, is employed to reinforce the positive aspect of confronting others and suggest one technique for coping. Participants hear a story, rank its five characters from one to five, and then form groups based on their first choices. Backers of different characters take turns explaining and rationalizing their choices to the rest of the group. Questions and rebuttals are in order, but no choice is superior and every choice has a coherent rationale. Most begin the interaction with the premise that only his/her choice is correct and typically feel that it is also self-evident. In the process of discovering what values and warrants underlie the different choices, participants are encouraged to move from a win/lose to a win/win vision of confronting multiple versions of reality.

Teamwork is a coping skill which seems particularly appropriate for both career and family situations at mid-life. Older children require a much less authoritarian type of family leadership than young ones; a sense of teamwork may be the last refuge against the teenage menace. Many participants at mid-life are managers or proprietors, finding that their work roles place less stress on producing and more on leadership of those who report to them. Understanding and fostering teamwork are essential to the successful exercise of that leadership.

The raft trip provides many opportunities for practicing teamwork, beginning with the necessity of putting the gear of two strangers together into one dunnage bag. While these waterproof bags are adequate for short trips, there is room for only four in the 12' by 5' raft interior. This means that one of the first tasks following crew assignments is the amalgamation of gear from eight people into four bags. For instance, the stock broker and the dentist agree to share a dunnage bag. Their two-suiters stand side by side on the beach, obviously overwhelming the

capacity of a single waterproof bag. Will she leave behind her new wet suit? Can he manage without his pillow? Dialogue begins and teaming is on.

Teaming continues to be a much practiced skill, especially as the eight strangers accommodate to paddling the raft and becoming a crew. During the trip, members of the crew take turns being "captain," e.g., calling directions for the paddling crew. From the first white water, it is clear that there were few, if any, followers; many mid-life people are used to being captains and it seems especially hard for them to relinquish control. Certain crew members are observed making surreptitious strokes when they feel the raft's attitude needs correcting. Others simply stop paddling when they no longer see the need, despite the captain's calls for "Forward!" Naturally, these behaviors make consistent progress next to impossible and render the position of "captain" frustrating. These results are immediately obvious to all concerned, e.g., the advantages of teamwork are self-evident. By the last day of the trip, strokes appear to be in unison and "silent ruddering" reduced to a minimum. While there are a number of communication simulations to reinforce teamwork, in this situation the rafting and boat requirements provide excellent practice.

Caveats

Though the major purpose of this paper is to investigate the relevancy of human communication training for the mid-life transition, some reservations about the attempt should be noted. Communication educators who have used the natural settings know that conditions outdoors may abort as well as fuel seminars. The presence of an upstream wind one morning meant that two hours were required to paddle as many miles--leaving eighteen more to go after lunch! Obviously, the group could not be enticed into discussion that night, and, consequently, one unit of the course simply vanished in the wind.

Othe reservations will be appreciated by readers who conduct organizational training, where occasionally not all participants are 100% motivated to become involved. Trainers also occasionally confront those who feel that the instructor's course objectives don't coincide with their own. In such circumstances, convincing the captive audience that they have something valuable and relevant to learn becomes an initial task of significant importance for the trainer. On these river trips, there are consistently several participants who have chosen the mid-life trip for reasons which may be tangential or even in conflict with the seminar objectives. For instance, on forms which elicit reasons for signing up, participants have written, "This is my only week off in the summer and I want to do a river trip," "My husband thought it would be good for me," or "I've always wanted to do an Outward Bound trip but was afraid I couldn't keep up with the younger people. I feel confident the skill level in this group will be close to my own." Eliciting support for seminar activities from participants who have come for these and other peripheral reasons is a delicate and sometimes difficult task. A letter to the participants several months before the course is less helpful than might be imagined.

The task of integrating these participants into full seminar participation is facilitated or impeded by teamwork between the facilitator and the instructors. Indeed, the timing and spacing of the seminar units is entirely dependent on the ability of the staff to predict and produce river activities which are meaningfully integrated with the seminar. Those educators who have designed and conducted communication programs with others will appreciate the nuances of full support, tacit support, and competing interests. The river program reaches its potential only with full support for the program on the part of the instructors.

Conclusion

Assessing the impact of personal growth programs is always a difficult task. However, evaluations are sent to participants one month after its completion, and the average 50% who reply declare substantial satisfaction with both the river and seminar experience. Unsolicited letters from participants have confirmed the value for certain individuals and offered insights on how it may be more effective in the future. Further study of the contributions human communication can make to adult development will be an asset to this seminar and other offerings. A more thorough knowledge of how communication techniques may be best applied in experiential setting will aid facilitators in designing and conducting such seminars. The interest in adult development is rising, and those who would link it with communication education must combine effort and judgment to discover the "correct attitude."